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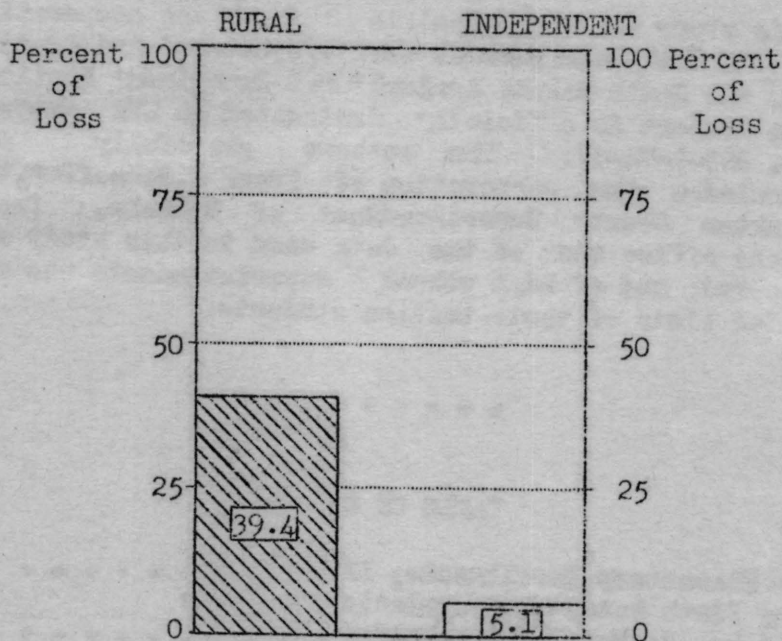
Kumlien, W. F.; Sauer, Howard M.; and Scandrette, C., "The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Yankton County" (1942). *Agricultural Experiment Station Rural Sociology Pamphlets*. 64.
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THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT
in
The Elementary Schools
of
Yankton County

W. F. Kumlien
Howard M. Sauer
C. Scandrette

1920-1940



From 1920 to 1940 rural enrollments in Yankton county suffered a 39.4 percent loss, while independent enrollments dropped only 5.1 percent during the same period.

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Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, Brookings, South Dakota

EXPLANATORY NOTE

During recent years, enrollments in most South Dakota elementary schools have declined at a very rapid rate. The prevailing type of rural school district organization in most counties has proved rather ineffective in coping with dwindling enrollments and with the consequent high costs per pupil.

It is the purpose of this pamphlet to assist educators, school board members and other Yankton county leaders by analyzing the nature of the problem and by presenting suggestions for its solution as they have grown out of the experiences of other South Dakota communities.

* * * * *

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This study was made possible through the cooperation of the State and Federal Work Projects Administration and the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station. The project is officially designated as WPA Project No. 265-1-74-57. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Frank F. Schaeffer, the Yankton County Superintendent of Schools, from whose office most of the data used in this study was secured; and of high school superintendents who supplied lists of their tuition students.

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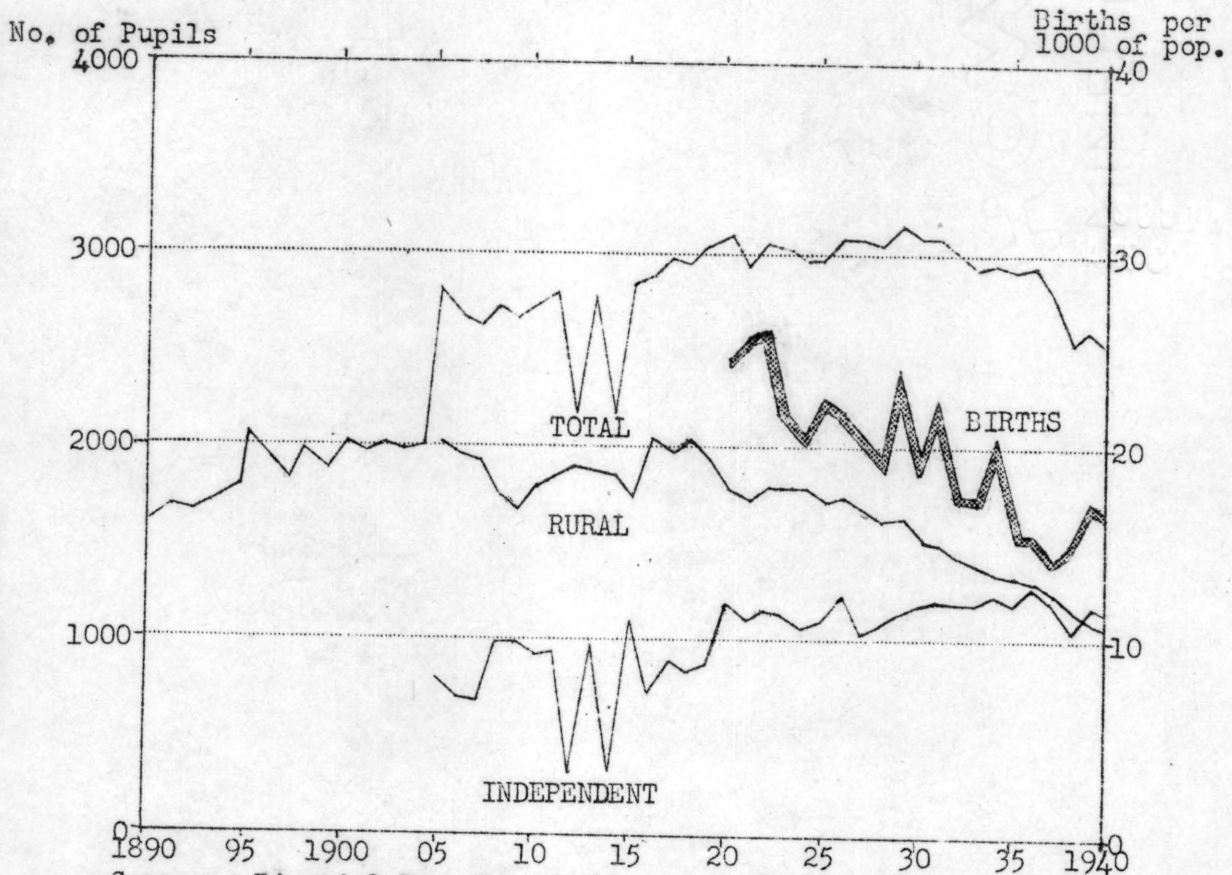
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The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Yankton County, 1890-1940

For a number of years population experts have been predicting that the downward trend of the birth rate will cause a corresponding decline in the elementary school enrollments. This prediction has been fulfilled in Yankton county as shown in Figure 1, although the enrollment situation in Yankton county is much more favorable than in most counties. From the 1890 enrollment of 1,634, the total elementary enrollment increased to the 1929 high enrollment of 3,147 pupils. The enrollment from this point shows a decrease to the 1940 enrollment of 2,519, which is still considerably higher than the original 1890 enrollment however. As is also shown in Figure 1, the rural enrollment has been declining rapidly since 1905, from 2,027 pupils to the 1940 enrollment of 1,069 pupils; and the independent enrollment began a gradual decrease after 1920.

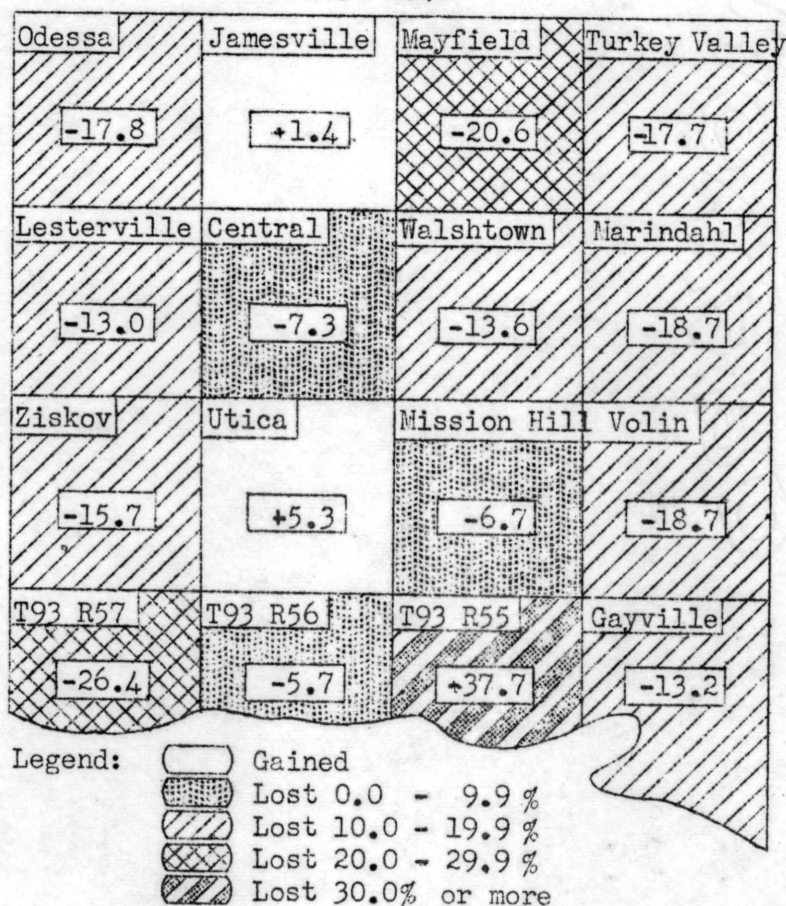
The trend in the Yankton county birth rate is also shown in Figure 1. The decline is sharply varied but persistent, dropping from an average of 24.4 births per 1000 of the population in 1920, to an average of 14.6 births in 1938. A slight increase left the birth rate in 1940 at 16.4 births per 1000 of the population. A steady decrease in the number of children who arrive at school age has been the result of this downward trend in the birth rate.

Figure 1. Elementary Enrollment Trends in Yankton County, 1890 -1940 and the Birth Rate Trend, 1920 - 1940



Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and Reports of the State Board of Health

Figure 2. Population Gains or Losses in Yankton County by Townships, 1930-1940

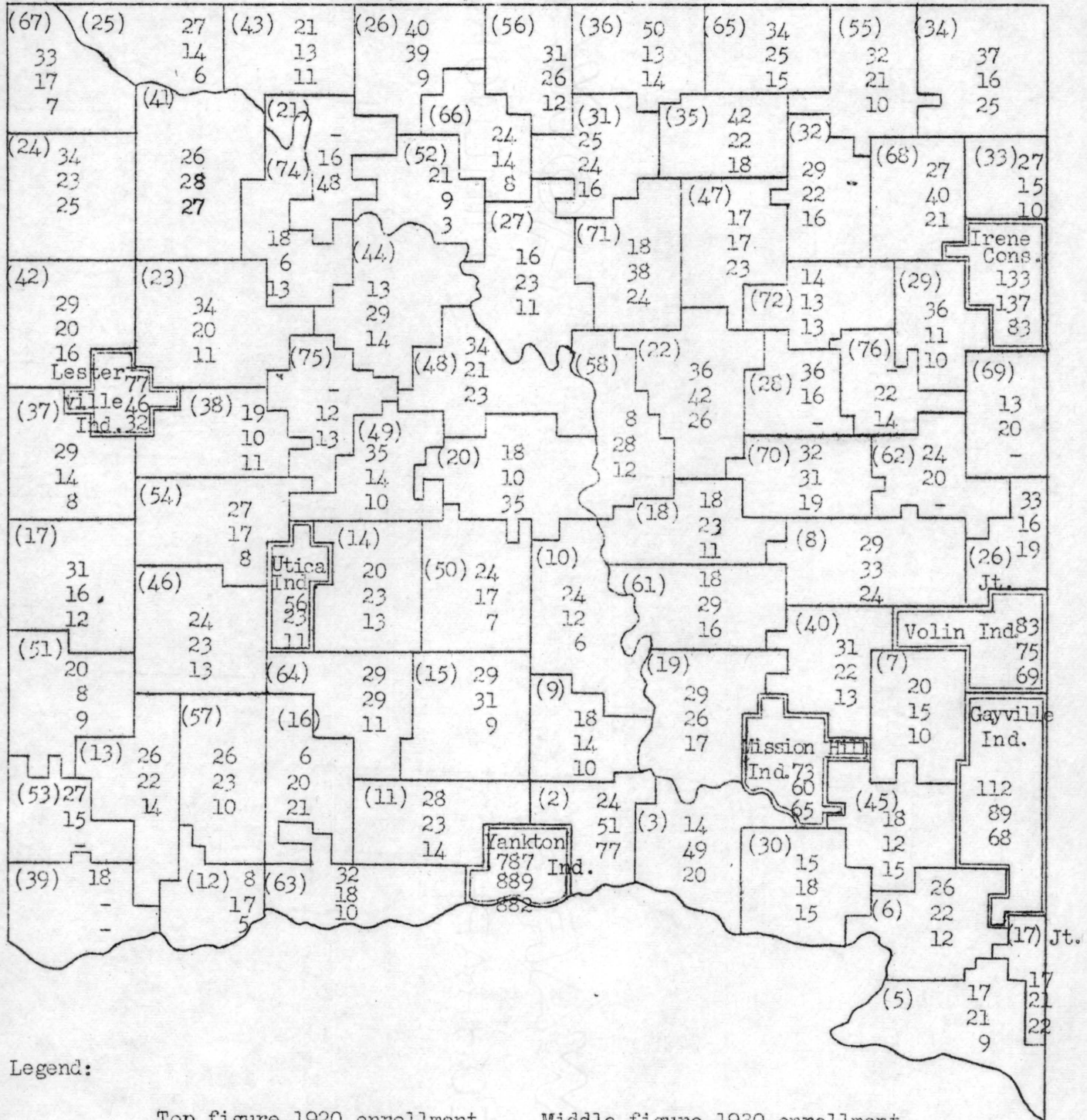


Source: Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940

An important factor in the elementary enrollment decline, the loss of population through outward migration, is shown in Figure 2. During the period 1930-1940, the population loss in Yankton county was 8.2 percent. This population loss, while not exceptionally high, is closely related to the decline in the rural enrollment. During this same period Yankton, the county seat, showed a population gain of 12 percent, and the combined population for the incorporated towns of the county increased 8.7 percent. Therefore it is evident that the bulk of the county loss was suffered by the rural areas. This fact is reflected in the relatively greater decline in rural enrollment compared to urban enrollment.

With the exception of three townships, all the townships of Yankton suffered a decrease in population during the 1930 - 40 period. Losses ranged from 5.7 percent in township 93, range 56, to 26.4 percent in township 93, range 57. The direct relation between population decrease and enrollment decline is indicated in the fact that, usually, the township which has the greatest loss in population has the greatest percent of decline in the school enrollment. (See Figures 2 and 3.)

Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in Yankton County Districts,
1920, 1930, and 1940



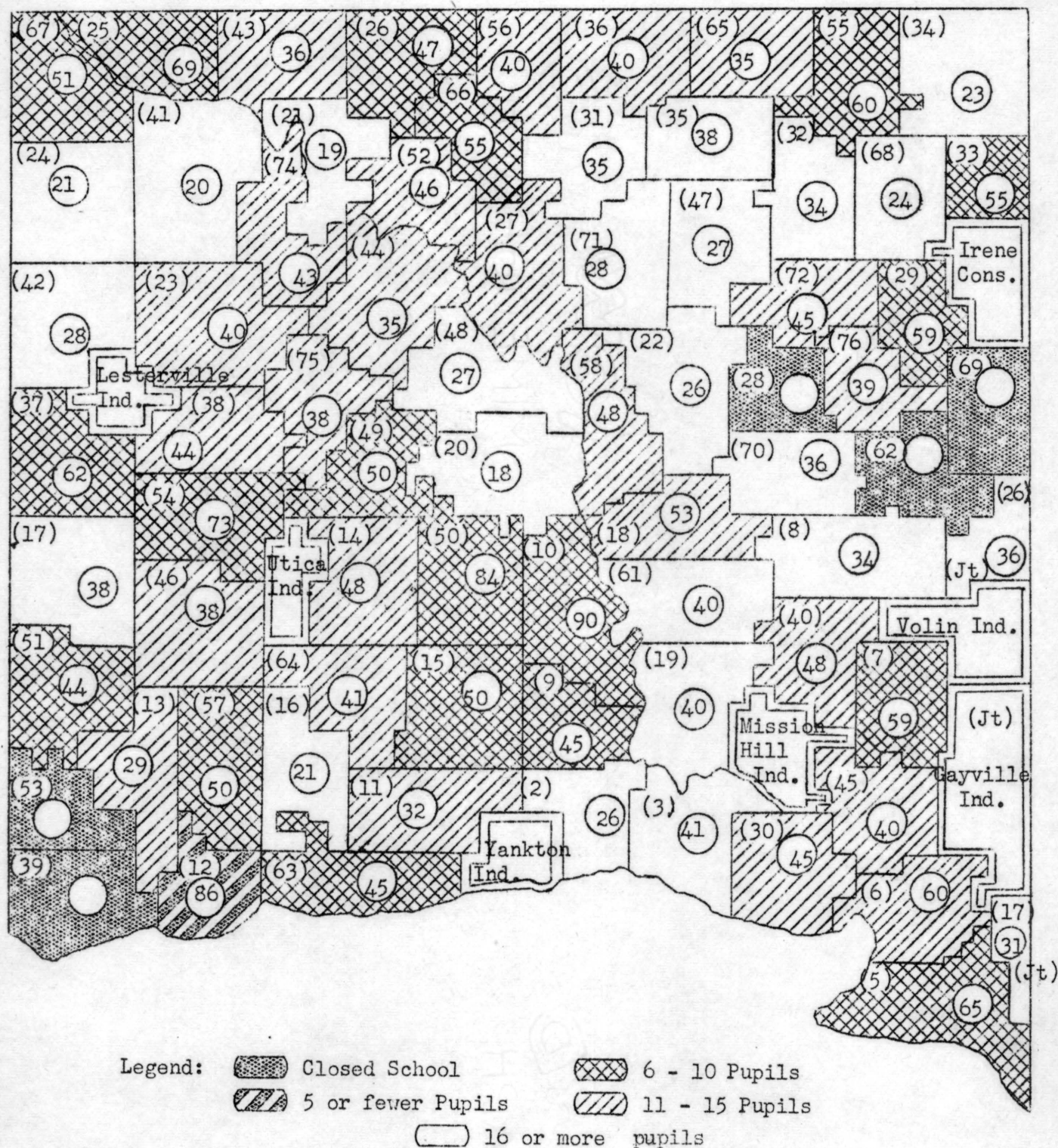
Source: Records of Yankton County Superintendent of Schools

In 1940, 68 common schools were in operation in Yankton county, in addition to the six independent districts of Lesterville, Utica, Yankton, Mission Hill, Gayville, and Volin and the one consolidated district of Irene.

The general downward trend in elementary enrollments is shown in Figure 3 which lists the enrollment of each district in the county for 1920, 1930, and 1940. A few districts gained in enrollment during the period 1920-1930, and 1930-1940, but a definite majority showed a loss. Of the 73 common districts in the county 54 showed a loss in enrollment for 1940 as compared with 1930 figures.

In 1940 five rural schools had been closed, one was operating with five or less pupils, and 19 schools had only six to ten pupils, although 23 schools had an enrollment of 16 or more pupils. Comparison of the rural enrollment figures for 1940 with those of 1920 shows that the 1920 enrollment of 1,763 decreased to 1,069 in 1940. While there was an average of 25.2 pupils per rural school in 1920 there was an average of only 15.7 pupils in 1940. Further enrollment losses may be expected in the future at a more gradual rate of decline, unless unforeseen population changes take place.

Figure 4. Instructional Cost Per Pupil by Size of School, in Yankton County, 1940



Source: Records of Yankton County Superintendent of School, 1940

A wide variation is found in the cost per pupil in the schools of Yankton county. In general the schools with the smallest enrollment show the greatest per-pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Yankton county ranged from \$18 per pupil in District 20 where the school enrolled 35 pupils, to \$86 in District 12 where there was an enrollment of only five pupils.

Table 1 (below) indicates that the operation of schools for ten or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost-per-pupil basis. Schools enrolling only five or fewer pupils illustrate this sharply. The average cost per pupil of the one school in this group was \$85.50, approximately \$86, as compared with \$36.41, the average for all schools.

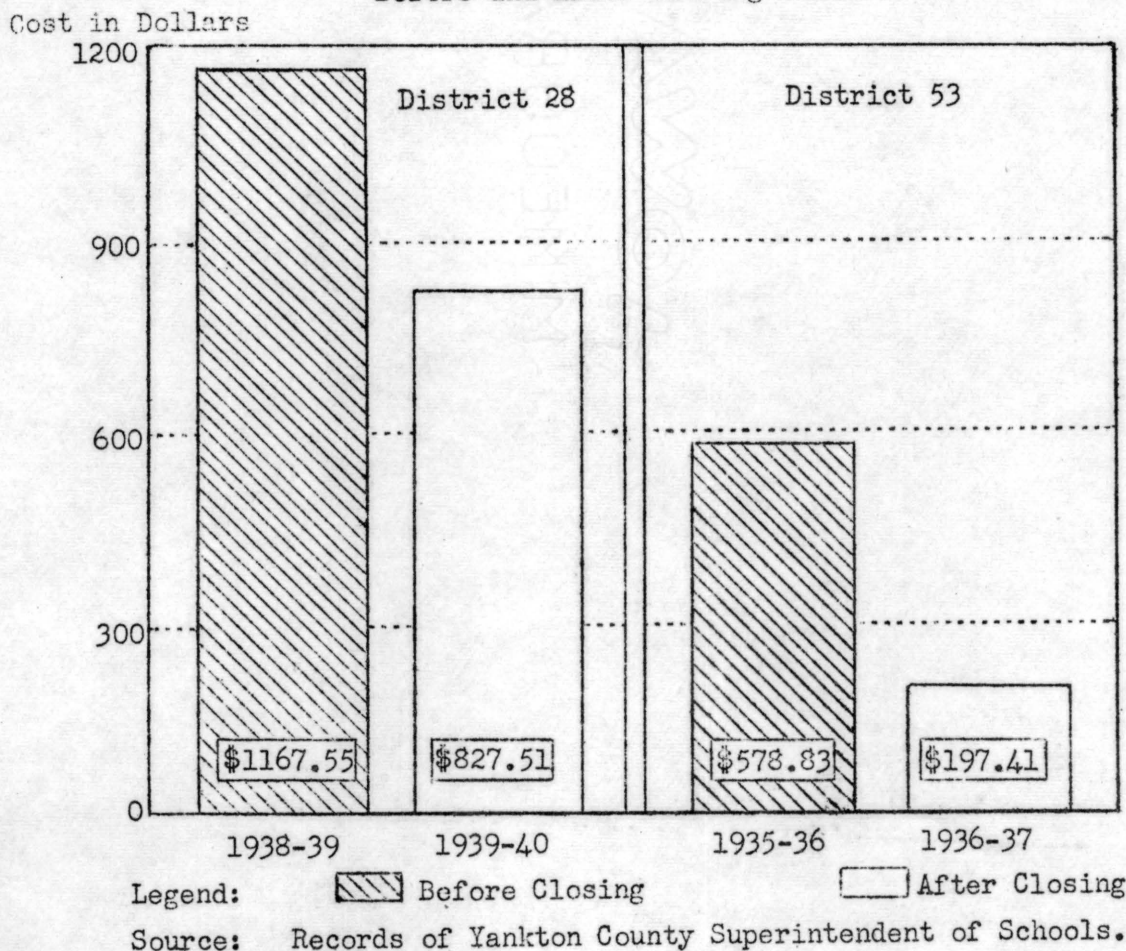
Table 1. Per Pupil Cost for Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Yankton County, 1940*

Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Total Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	73	1069	\$38,917.34	\$36.41
Closed	5	--	--	--
5 or fewer pupils	1	5	427.50	85.50
6-10 pupils	19	166	9,464.34	57.01
11-15 pupils	25	320	13,145.50	41.07
16 or more pupils	23	578	15,880.00	27.47

Source: Records of Yankton County Superintendent of Schools

*Based on Teachers' Salaries only.

Figure 5. Cost of Operating Schools in Two Districts of Yankton County Before and After Closing Schools.

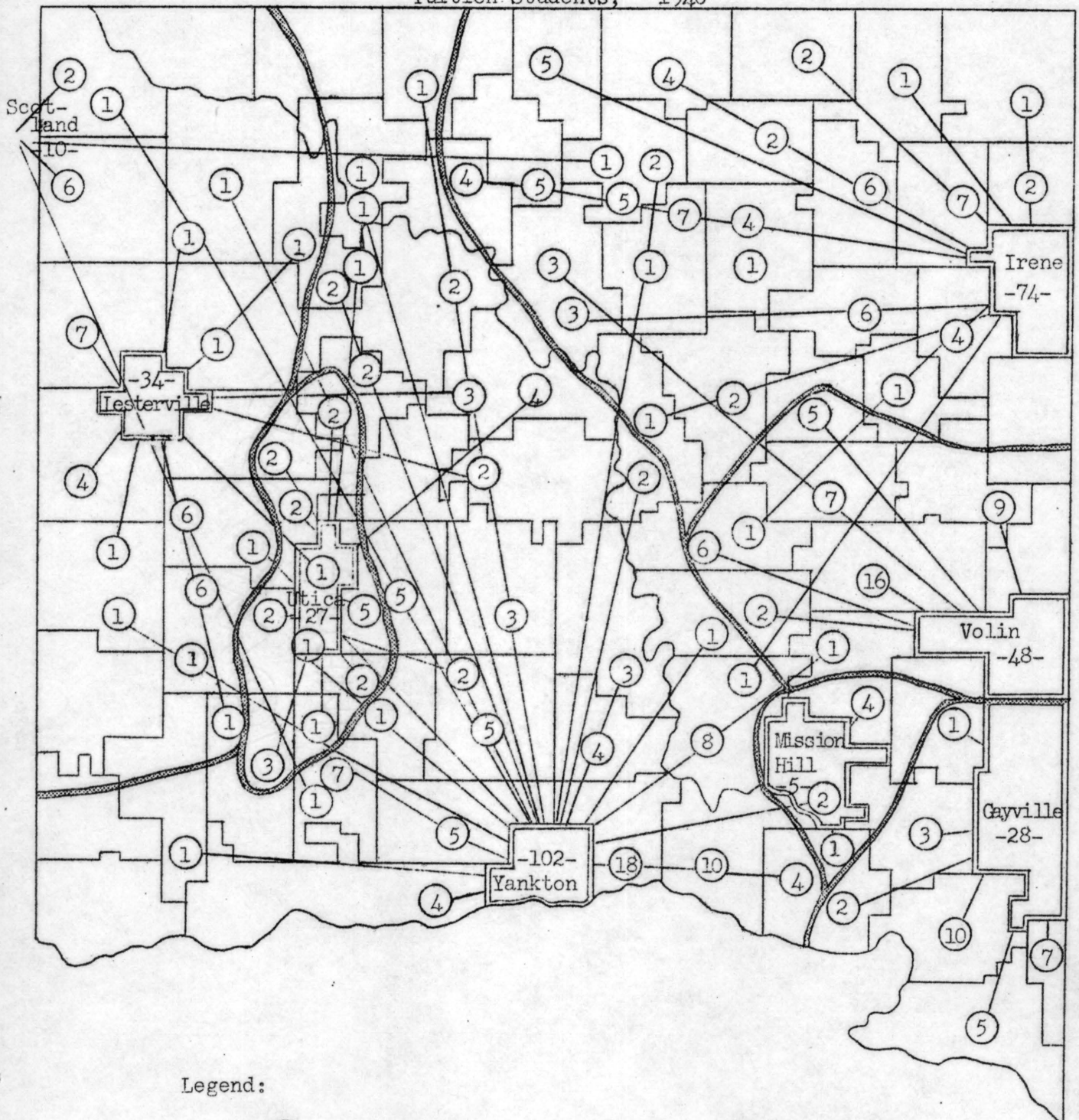


To reduce high per pupil costs, school districts throughout South Dakota have closed a large number of schools during recent years, particularly those with diminishing enrollments.

During the 1935-36 school term, school operation costs to District 53 totaled \$578.83. The following year the school was closed and the pupils were sent to another district with the home district paying the tuition and transportation. That year school operation costs to the district, including tuition and transportation payment, totaled \$197.41, a saving of \$381.42. A similar though smaller saving was made in District 28. During the 1938-39 school term, operation costs for this school were \$1,167.55, as compared with \$827.51, the first year it was closed.

Since the cost per pupil increases as the number of pupils attending school decreases, and since there is a lack of intellectual stimulation provided by competition*, it seems practical both from the standpoint of economy and educational efficiency to close a school when the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.

* It is common knowledge among teachers that where there are only one or two pupils to a grade it is usually difficult to get students interested.



Legend:

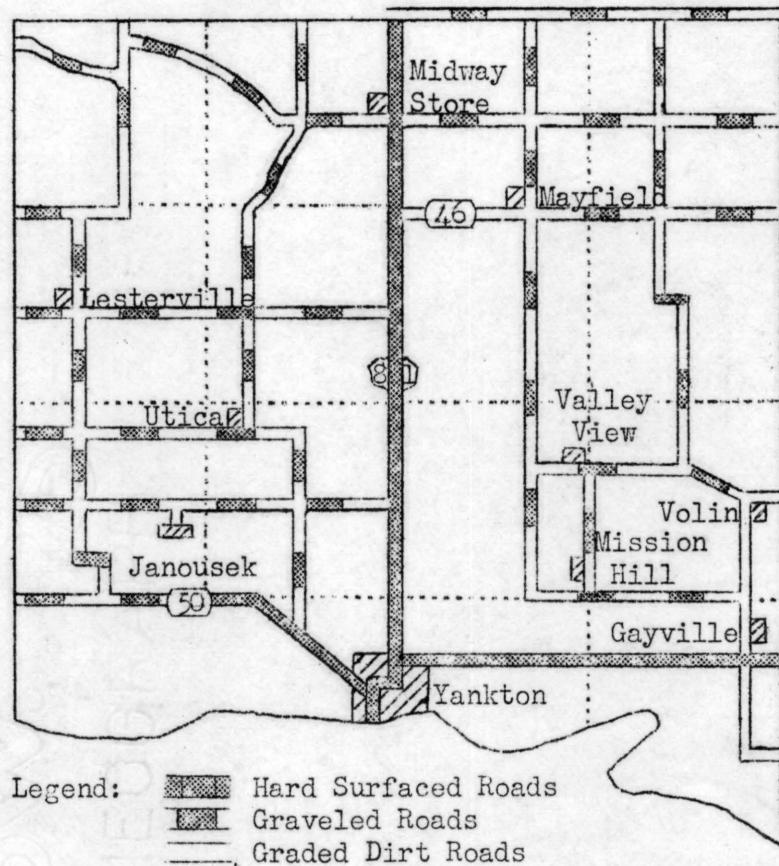
- Number of tuition students from each district
- 0- Number of tuition students attending from this county

Source: Records of High School Superintendents, 1940

Since 1921 school districts of South Dakota lacking high schools of their own have been required to pay tuition costs for their students who attend high school outside the district. Figure 6 shows the areas from which high schools drew their Yankton county tuition students, numbering approximately 331 in 1940. Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, the people of the districts of Yankton county have adopted the policy of sending their students to high schools already existing in town and village centers. Perhaps a similar plan could be adapted to elementary education. As elementary enrollments continue to shrink and cost per pupil to mount, it would appear to be a practical solution to close the rural schools and send the remaining pupils to village schools. In such a plan the home district would pay tuition and transportation costs. Aside from the economical advantage, these plans would extend to farm children the superior educational facilities of the town schools.

However, until the time that concentration of educational services in town centers becomes more general, districts may continue their policy of closing those schools in which enrollments fall below a minimum and of sending their pupils to the nearest rural school in operation.

Figure 7. Highway System in Yankton County, 1941



Source: Official Map of the State Highway Commission, 1941

Improved roads are found in most sections of the county, as Figure 7 indicates. Good roads and the advent of the automobile have placed the towns of the county within easy reach of a vast majority of farm families, revolutionizing many aspects of rural life. Services formerly performed by open-country institutions on a neighborhood basis have been shifted to town and village centers. Notable cases are the crossroads general store and the open-country church. The farmer finds it increasingly convenient to go to the village center to buy groceries, clothing and other necessities; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to engage in various forms of recreation. In addition, the farmer finds it more convenient to send his sons and daughters to the village high schools.

A natural result of this trend toward concentration of service would be for many of the younger children to be taken into the village to attend elementary schools. Since village enrollments have also declined, the pupils from farming areas could probably be absorbed into the urban schools without any great disruption or expansion of existing school systems.

How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities Are Successfully
Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem

School boards confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study their local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have all been tested by different South Dakota communities and have been found practical. One or the other of the first two alternatives has frequently been used as a temporary measure until further action was necessary. The last two plans are in the nature of a more or less permanent reorganization of the present rural district system.

Cooperating with nearby rural schools

When enrollment has dropped to five or fewer pupils certain districts have kept their district organization intact but have closed one or more schools. In cases where all schools of the district have been closed, the remaining pupils have been sent to the nearest adjoining rural school where satisfactory arrangements for tuition and transportation could be made.

Tuition pupils to town schools

Where satisfactory arrangements could not be made with nearby rural schools, the remaining pupils have been sent as tuition students to the nearest independent school in village or town. This plan is frequently no more expensive than the first, but has the further advantage of better educational experience than is usually possible in the one room school. In effect, it is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in sending farm children as tuition pupils to high school.

Consolidation

Where the second plan has been in operation for a number of years, town and nearby country districts have frequently consolidated into a single district. Such a plan has many advantages, but should first be tried out informally as a centralized school system before determining the details of consolidation.

County-wide district plan

In at least one west river county a county-wide district plan is now in operation. Under such a plan one county school board determines the location of rural schools and can regulate the number of such schools to fit in with the enrollment trend.
